





A READING: BIRDS

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# A Reading: Birds

Beverly Dahlen

little red leaves 2011

down to bare words

to say them

ragged flocks remnants [ancient”

[prehistoric”

[“time out of mind”]

what time out of the sun

they fly

yelling

as they come

what word

we say  
“we” say

cranes

croaking out of the sky

the greater, the lesser sandhill crane eyeing them in the fallow  
flooded fields of the central valley of California ages and ages ago  
out of the sunset behind the mountain now called Diablo

\*

*in the colden of winter the fogges creepin up from the river  
the gret marshy rivers of the valley all together then the flood*

the fog

tule fog

we say “tule fog”

a Nahuatl word, *tollin*, came up from Mexico with the Spanish, now naturalized in English as *tule*.

Tule, the “down to the ground” fog mother used to say, the  
winter fog of California, the great central  
valley of California [summer the first time I saw it, men tossing  
watermelons hand to hand into

a boxcar on the siding: Modesto?]

tule: a kind of rush, a reed, *Scirpus*, several sorts growing in the San Joaquin the Spanish called the *tulares*. A strong grass that served the local natives for everything from boat-building to clothing.

Morning:  
fog at the window and  
back at the Gate the  
moaning of the foghorns

The cranes flying through the fog, out of the sun into the open valley to feed, with ducks and geese and tundra swans, the flocks so numerous in the old days they say the sky was darkened for hours with their passing. The legendary, nearly mythical abundance of that time, how to say it or see it or imagine that time.

The greater white-fronted goose in that fair field, geese,  
more than a thousand in the flock moaning, a kind of low  
hum, singing the blues. The spectacle of the birds, how we  
go out to see them now, provide for them, shelters, refuges,  
how we've beggared them and set them aside amid the low-  
lands of the valley, the trucks roaring night and day over I5,  
San Diego to Sacramento, ripping up the countryside.

Sacramento to Redding to the Oregon border:

*above* Keeping Still, Mountain

*below* The Abysmal, Water

the very place, we say, tearing at the air.

\*

elegant birds, cranes, red-crowned  
picking through the corn-stubble

*long* would be the word, beaky  
leggy, gray or tawny gray  
feathers  
mauve?

words betray the bird

it watches us watching  
waiting for it to perform  
showbirds

will they dance for us?  
throw sticks in the air?  
mating

we voyeurs peeking  
through our glasses  
there naming  
them collecting  
them with lists and  
cameras the birds  
their exotic rituals

\*

Pintails, ruddy ducks, shovelers and stilts. Avocets stir-  
ring up the water for a meal. Herons and egrets deep in the  
ditches [we saved them from the feather trade] kingfishers  
above, and above them a kite, black shoulders hovering.  
Standing there in the air.

\*

"I caught this morning morning's minion..."  
caught, caught

caught it, with words, for Christ's sake.

\*



Who watches the birds?  
eyes the sparrows, spins the lilies, feeds the lambs,  
“who made thee”  
doves in the pine  
finches at the thistles.

What are they to us, mythical creatures,  
birds  
because they sing  
because they fly  
  
because

when we were children  
we saw them on the lawn  
and in the trees  
and  
were taught their names  
robin  
sparrow  
and because we loved them  
when they died  
we buried them  
with ceremony  
and flowers  
in the backyard.

[would mother them, sweethearts, set grain and seeds out for them, drive away squirrels and cats, scold the greedy jays, and watch for the others as the seasons change: juncos in the winter, the three-noted wavering song of the golden-crowned sparrow returning in the fall, the chirping of the towhee in the dusk of a summer night, that one flat note call of the towhee up from the garden]

\*

House finches now, “like a sparrow dipped in wine” with their querulous call, the question at the end, chatter, chatter, and the lesser goldfinch, tuxedo tail. The mourning doves’ *hoo-hoo-hoo* [how miserable is this imitation], the call of the dove. Softly, thinking of its story, why does it mourn. Listening.

\*

Beverly Dahlen  
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## ENDNOTES

*The story of the mourning dove is told by the Yurok people of north-western California. They live along the lower Klamath River near its mouth. The story is published by Malcolm Margolin of Heyday Books in Berkeley, reprinted from an earlier UC Press publication; this version of the translation is by Florence Shaughnessy:*

Once upon a time all the  
inhabitants of the earth  
were gambling, and the  
dove too was gambling.  
He had a grandfather.  
Someone ran up and told  
him, "The old man is  
just going to die."

The dove said, "I will  
have another gamble,"  
for he was winning. And  
again the messenger ran up  
and said, "Well, hurry!

Your grandfather is just  
going to die."

The dove said, "I will have  
another gamble; and if I  
find my grandfather  
already dead when I come,  
this is what I will do: I will  
mourn for him so long as  
the heavens endure."

And today that is just what  
he is doing. If somewhere  
you hear the dove as he sits  
there, you will hear him as  
it were mourning. Very well  
he says "Wee...poo...poo,"  
and so it is that he is still  
mourning to this day.

A native of Portland, Oregon, Beverly Dahlen has lived San Francisco for many years. Her first book, *Out of the Third*, was published by Momo's Press in 1974. Two chapbooks, *A Letter at Easter* (Effie's Press, 1976) and *The Egyptian Poems* (Hipparchia Press, 1983) were followed by the publication of the first volume of *A Reading* in 1985 (*A Reading 1—7*, Momo's Press). Since then, three more volumes of *A Reading* have appeared. Chax Press published *A Reading 8—10* (1992); Potes and Poets Press: *A Reading 11—17* (1989); Instance Press: *A Reading 18—20* (2006). Chax Press also published the chapbook *A-reading Spicer & Eighteen Sonnets* in 2004. Ms. Dahlen has published work in numerous periodicals and anthologies. Her essay on beauty and her poem called "A Reading... the Beautiful" were published in *Crayon* 5.

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